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ADDRESS

BEFORE

THE ENOSINIAN SOCIETY

OF

COLUMBIAN COLLEGE,

ON THE

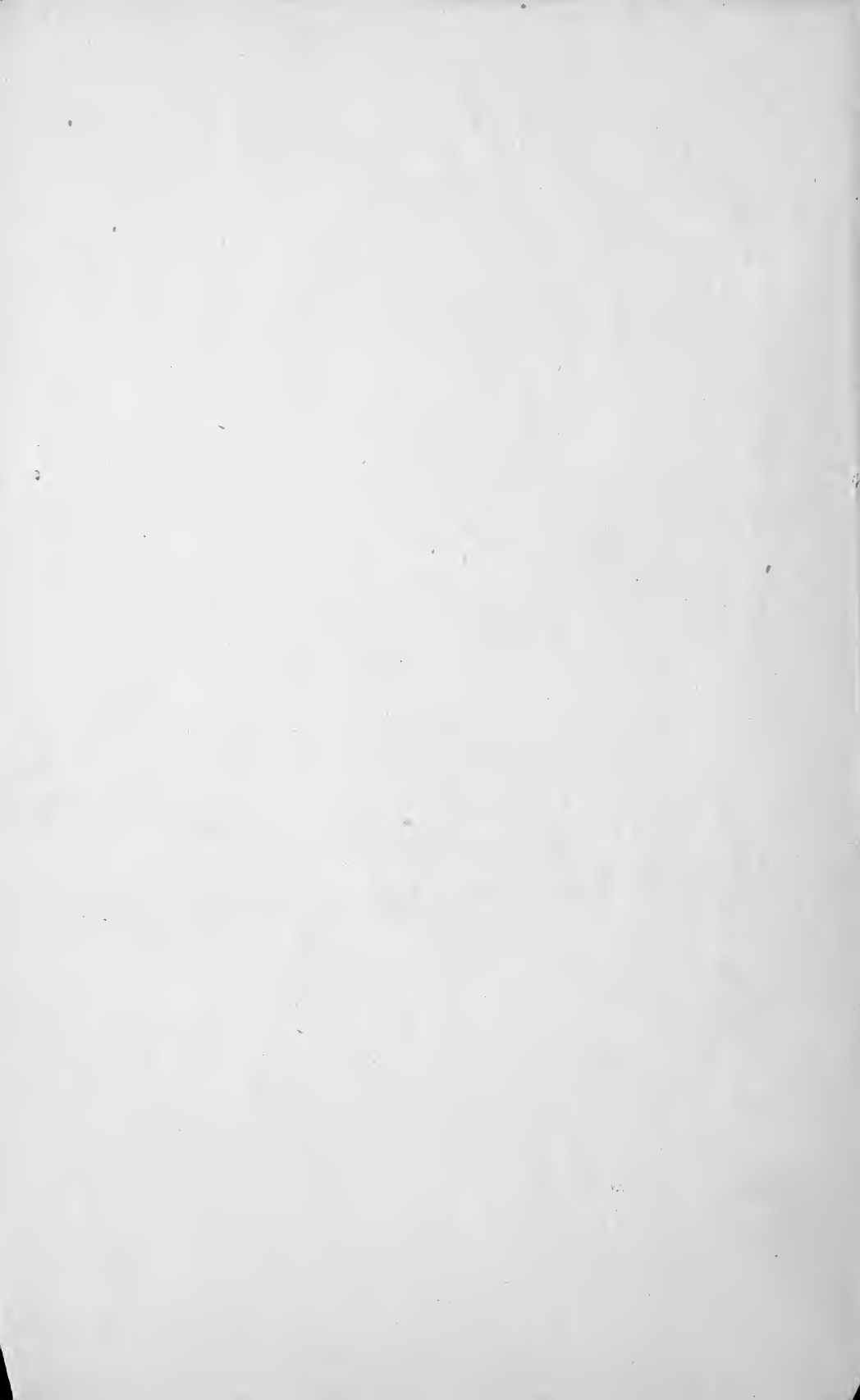
OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF THEIR TWENTY-EIGHTH
ANNIVERSARY.


BY WM. B. WEBB, Esq.

WASHINGTON:

PRINTED BY J. AND G. S. GIDEON.

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ENOSINIAN HALL, July 12, 1847.

SIR: At a meeting of the Enosinian Society, held this morning, it was unanimously resolved, that the thanks of the society be tendered you for the able and satisfactory address delivered last evening, and that a committee be appointed to request a copy for publication.

Permit us to add our personal solicitations to the wishes of the body of which we are the representatives.

We remain, sir, your very obedient servants,

J. R. HOLLIDAY,
J. H. WILSON,
THOS. JONES,

Committee.

WM. B. WEBB, Esq.,

Washington City, D. C.

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WASHINGTON, July 19, 1848.

GENTLEMEN: Your very flattering letter of the 12th instant, tendering me the thanks of the Society, and requesting a copy of my address for publication, was duly received.

For this testimonial of kind feeling towards me, I beg, gentlemen, that you, and through you the Society, will accept my sincere acknowledgments. Enclosed I send you a copy of the address, which is at your disposal.

With many wishes for the future welfare of each and every member of the Society and College, allow me to remain, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

W. B. WEBB.

To Messrs. J. R. HOLLIDAY,

J. H. WILSON,

THOS. JONES,

*Committee.*



## ADDRESS.

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GENTLEMEN OF THE ENOSINIAN SOCIETY :

I should feel that I had omitted the pleasantest part of my duty upon this occasion, were I not to thank you for the great honor you have conferred upon me, by selecting me to fill the place of your orator on this anniversary. This is an honor the more deeply felt, the more gratefully acknowledged, as coming from that Association with which some of the fondest reminiscences of my life are indissolubly connected ; with whose members I am proud to rank myself as a brother, as a child of the same cherished Alma Mater. A few years only have elapsed, gentlemen, since it was my privilege to take an active part in the proceedings of the Society whose anniversary we now celebrate. I look back upon that period as the brightest and happiest of my life. From my exulting freshmanhip, to the moment when I found myself the possessor of a degree, my college life will ever be remembered as a green spot in my existence. Fain would I pause and linger amid the fascinating recollections which thoughts of those by-gone days bring around me. Fain would I summon, one by one, the spirits of the companions of that youthful period—fight with them once more the battle of debate, and commune with them again of mutual studies. Alas ! some of them have already been gathered to that spirit land whence no earthly voice can summon them ; others are seeking reputation and honor in the various paths of life ; and but a small band remains near the well remembered spot—the spot where we first learnt the true use of knowledge, where our minds were enlarged and invigorated by deep draughts from the fount of learning, and where we met men as instructors and companions, for whom we have ever cherished the highest feelings of respect and friendship. But I pause, lest I trespass on too prolific a theme ; I pause, once more, from the very depths of my heart, to thank you.

In the vast range of subjects which present themselves for our consideration, on an occasion like the present, none, perhaps, offer so many inducements for selection as those which have relation to politics. The political greatness, both past and present, and the political destiny of his country, are topics of peculiar interest to the American. But, gentlemen, I deem it a subject of mutual congratulation, that, at this time, when the political world is being convulsed from one end to the other, the monarch-

ies of Europe seemingly tottering on their foundations, and the two great parties in our own country engaged in a desperate struggle for the victory of their respective principles, we can assemble peacefully and quietly to celebrate a literary anniversary. Allow me, therefore, gentlemen, to invite your attention to a consideration of what, in the absence of a better name, I shall term the Literary Wants of America.

The position which a nation takes among the other nations of the world, depends upon nothing so especially as the character of the great men it produces. Its history is but the record of their deeds, the story of their achievements. The manners of a people require but a few words of mention; while whole volumes are insufficient for a detail of the expeditions of Cyrus, or Hannibal, or Napoleon. In relating these latter, the historian has faithfully performed the best part of his duty. History would become too voluminous did it busy itself with recording any but the most prominent events that mark the progress of a nation. The ingenuity of the reader must be exercised, or historical writings would fail to entertain as well as instruct, and become nothing more than dull tables of chronology. Fashioned by the people, the great men of an age or nation become its representatives. Nothing marks more surely the changes which have agitated a nation, than the differences of character that are apparent among its great men. Rome has given birth to a Tarquin and a Brutus, to a Cincinnatus and a Sylla, a Pompey and a Cæsar, a Rienzi and a Stephen Colonna.

But in nothing is this more singularly observable, than in the progress which nations make in civilization and refinement. Individual effort is the soul, the foundation of every movement of reform. It marks every step of a nation's progress towards perfection. Such are the influences of great minds upon the nation, and in view of them society has a duty to perform: that duty is to see that those men are appreciated whose characters will tend to elevate the nation in the eyes of present and future generations. By the encouragement of cultivation and refinement, by conferring an importance upon those pursuits and occupations which tend to elevate and dignify the people, must society do this. Man can be elevated and dignified in no surer way, than through the cultivation and enlargement of his mind. By efforts to engender a taste for the fine arts, by the diffusion of knowledge, by the cultivation of literature, and the encouragement of literary pursuits, should this be done. Science and scientific men, literature and literary men, deserve the most admiring consideration, the highest honors at the hands of nations.

By literature, as taken in connection with the idea of a nation, something more is meant than the narrow definition which the lexicographer attaches



to the term. It is the expression of a nation's mind; the written language of a nation's thought. It is the medium through which nation holds converse with nation, age with age. Speaking of the subject, an able writer says: "A country which has no national literature, or a literature too insignificant to force itself abroad, must always be to its neighbors, at least in every important spiritual respect, an unknown and misestimated country. Its towns may figure on our maps; its revenues, population, manufactures, political connections, may be recorded in statistical books, but the character of the people has no symbol and no voice; we cannot know them by speech and discourse, but only by mere sight and outward observation of their manners and procedure." In its literature, a nation lives and speaks long after its greatness and glory have departed. The strains of the blind bard of Greece have lost nothing of their sweetness by the lapse of ages; and the thunders of that eloquence,

"Which shook  
The Arsenal, and fulmined over Greece  
From Macedon to Artaxerxes throne,"

have never ceased to thrill the heart of every reader. The fame of the warrior may decay and be forgotten; the glories gained upon the tented field may pale and grow dim, as time waxes older; but posterity will ever accord respect and honor to the productions of the poet and the philosopher, the historian and the orator. Upon Alexander and Cæsar, Napoleon and Frederick, we gaze with awe-struck admiration; but with Homer and Virgil, Milton and Shakspeare, we hold familiar intercourse, we take "sweet counsel," and live over the scenes hallowed by their writings.

The progress of a nation in refinement can in nothing be so distinctly traced as in the history of its literature. Indeed, the history of every people will fully demonstrate that their progress in refinement has kept pace with their zeal in the cultivation of letters. Progress in literature, in that which elevates the mind, dignifies the character, and purifies the taste of its people, is the noblest progress that a nation can make. In no cause can it better expend its energies, talents, and zeal. America has this task to perform before she can be said to have a national literature. Authors she has already produced—men of talent and ability—men of whose productions she has reason to be proud. But has she given birth to any whose writings can be ranked with those of the other civilized nations of the globe? Has she produced any author whose name will be handed down to posterity by the side of those of Milton and Shakspeare, Voltaire and Racine, Gœthe and Schiller? Where are her great poems? Where her learned dissertations? True, our country is annually filled with books, the productions, too, of American talent; but how many of them are destined

to outlive the generation which has given them birth? How many will become the inheritance of future ages?

Let me invite your attention, gentlemen, for a few minutes, while I briefly and hurriedly advert to some of the causes which have prevented the progress of that cultivation of which I have spoken, to the advantages which America possesses, and the means she must use towards the establishment of a national literature.

The American people are singularly utilitarian in their views and actions. Present good is the chief end towards the attainment of which the energies of the nation are directed. Nothing strikes a calm observer of society so forcibly as the singular importance which is attached by men of the present day to the accumulation of wealth, and the respect which is paid to its possessor. The capitalist is the aristocrat of this day; money the talismanic charm which surrounds its possessor with ready flatterers, and too frequently obtains for him that respect and deference which is denied to real talent and worth, if clothed in the garb of poverty. Is it to be wondered at, then, that money-getting should be an object for the exercise of ingenuity and energy; that men should tax their brains to invent plans and build machines for the more speedy attainment of this "elixir vitæ?"

The present age may, without extravagance of expression, be called the age of machinery, and to no country can this term be more aptly applied than to America. All the ingenuity, all the inventive energy, all the originality of the people, are directed into one channel. In every branch of the mechanical arts, America is surpassed by no nation on the globe. Great have been her achievements, and wonderful is her youthful skill in the application of machinery to the production of whatever ministers to man's daily necessities. Many of the laws that govern steam, air, and electricity, have been discovered by her scientific men, and boldly and happily have they applied them. Articles which were, a few years since, the elaborate production of days of toil, are now produced in immense numbers by the single revolution of a crank. This utilitarian spirit of the age, while it gives the nation a name and reputation for skill in the application of machinery among the nations of the world, must necessarily do it at the sacrifice of all rapid advance in refinement and cultivation. For it absorbs men in pursuits which have their ultimate aim in the attainment of present ease and comfort, and occupies his best energies, his inventive faculties, his powers of origination, with things which are only temporary in their benefit. This is not the spirit for a nation to encourage chiefly among its people. Man is a being capable of the highest and holiest purposes, the loftiest and sublimest thoughts. This higher and nobler part of

his nature must be exercised; and that nation fails in its duty which leaves him with no encouragement to such exercise.

Side by side with the American's utilitarianism, comes his devotedness to politics and the concerns of party. One of the proudest privileges of the American is unlimited freedom of speech, unrestrained power to discuss the actions of his Government and rulers. No edicts of prince or monarch, no acts of Parliament or Assembly, render it criminal or treasonable for the American to give free expression to his thoughts, in conversation or on paper. The legislator and the executor of the laws are both elected from the people; and their every act passes under the strictest scrutiny and most critical examination. This state of things, while it has added to the security of the laws and institutions of the land, has made every man in the community a politician. Responsibility always engenders dignity in him upon whom it is reposed; and, by making our citizens voters, our laws have placed them under a responsibility of the most important character. This peculiar feature in our national system renders it incumbent upon every man to acquaint himself, to some extent at least, with all the various interests and questions which must agitate the nation. It is not with the system that fault is to be found at this time; not with the cool and deliberate examination of political questions for conviction's sake; not with that spirit of patriotism which induces the American conscientiously to prepare himself for a judgment upon the questions that concern his vital interests. These are all highly commendable; nay, they deserve no commendation, since they are but the performance of a duty, the highest duty on his part towards his country. But it is this love of party, this devotion of every interest to faction, which so greatly distinguishes the American, and which is so decidedly to be condemned. Party and party interests are fearfully important in this country. Nothing excites more violently the passions, the prejudices, the jealousies of men, than political contention. In every village and in every city, at the hustings, in the forum, and in the halls of legislation, is this excitement carried to an alarming extent. By the many, time is rarely given to thought and reason. Party organization takes the place of devotion to national interests. Men are enlisted under the command of regular leaders, and drilled into the mechanical performance of what should be their happiest duty; and the sacred privilege of the ballot-box too often becomes the subject of bargain and sale. Is it to be expected that a people, among whom factions constantly maintain a contest, should devote much time to the advancement of refinement and the cultivation of letters, or give much attention to the establishment of a national literature? Amidst the jar of interests so discordant, opinions so directly opposite, it is scarcely probable that the

nation will give calm attention to such subjects as greatness of thought, elegance of style, and purity of taste.

These are the greatest obstacles in the way of America's progress in cultivation and elegance. There is another, but it is more venial and easily corrected. The Americans are a vain people, and great cause have they for the weakness. Right have they to be proud, but they have no right to let their pride make them forgetful of the greatness of other nations. Right have they to boast of their heroes and their victories; their institutions and their laws; of their statesmen and their philosophers; of their fearless boldness in the application of scientific principles, and their rapid progress in the useful arts; but they have no right to be unmindful of their intimate connection with, and constant dependence upon, other nations. His pride is natural, when the American looks back upon the past history of his country. But a short time since and the builder's hammer at Jamestown, or the chaunted hymn of the Pilgrim, the crack of the hunter's rifle, or the cry of the hungry panther, were the only sounds that disturbed the sabbath-like stillness of spots where now stand mighty cities, shining in the sunbeams, with dazzling spire and dome. His pride is natural, when the American gazes along the procession of the last ninety years; when he looks on Bunker Hill and Trenton, on Yorktown and Champlain, on Buena Vista and Cerro Gordo. But, alas! what a check that pride must receive, when he reflects how humble a position in the scale of literary excellence his country occupies. What chagrin and disappointment must *he* feel who would fain see his country assume a lofty position among the elegant nations of the Globe, when he finds her destitute of the first grand requisite of a purer eminence. How poor a lover of his country must he be, who, proud to dwell upon her military and civic achievements, would not have her known to coming generations as the noble seat of learning and refinement.

It is urged by those who would apologize for the feeble condition of literature in America, that she is yet young, and needs age and maturity to prepare her for a station by the side of the older nations of the earth. This is but a poor apology for inaction. The nation's youth should offer one of the strongest inducements to early and constant action. Youth is the season for preparation, the period when the mind is fresh and vigorous. Early training makes the man active and strong; early cultivation makes him refined and elevated in his tastes. This, then, is one of the greatest advantages that America has, and the one best calculated to insure the establishment of a national literature. She is young and vigorous, full of energy and active impulses. No long practised and set habits of thought and sentiment, no blind veneration for any particular standard of taste or

purity, no obstinate devotion to ancient ideas of beauty, hamper America with their shackles. This is the greatest privilege of the writer, that he has to write for a people who possess the fresh and vigorous minds of youth; that he has a taste to form, a standard to raise, an idea of beauty to build up. A great and glorious work have the authors of our country, the work of giving tongue and utterance to the thought of a nation; of

"Giving each rock a storied tale,  
Pouring a lay through every vale;  
Knitting, as with a mortal band,  
Their story to their native land;  
Combining, thus, the interest high,  
Which genius lends to beauty's eye!"

But there is another advantage which America has, peculiarly her own. An American literature must be a literature of the people. In other nations, where refinement is confined almost entirely to the upper classes of society, the patronage of such classes is the first thing to be gained by the author. To them he dedicates his mental productions, and from them he hopes to obtain that praise which should come from his country. In America nothing of this kind exists; the people are as much their own mental as their own political rulers. Here the lowest as well as the highest are to be addressed, if the author would accomplish anything by his productions. To the people and their good must he dedicate his labors. What could excite the writer, were he a true patriot, to more serious devotedness to the cause of elevating and refining his countrymen, to the advocacy of their highest and best interests, and the expression of the noblest and purest sentiments, than the thought that his countrymen are to be the judges of his productions.

I come now to consider the means to be used by America in her efforts to build for herself a national literature. I find these to consist in the wisest and best education of her people. Popular education—the education of the masses—is the constant theme of conversation and thought with the American people. State legislation has busied itself with many plans for the better conduct and organization of primary and high schools, and many great and important benefits have flowed from its efforts. The common school system of portions of America is, perhaps, more perfect than that of any other country; and, as a natural consequence, the citizens of such portions are more highly educated than any other people in Christendom. It is not my purpose to enter into any discussion of the merits or demerits of any particular system of popular education. The object is a grand one, and the little that has been accomplished plainly demonstrates how much may be done by united and energetic effort. But it is to be feared that this object, as pursued among us, is far too frequently narrow and con-

tracted, too entirely mechanical and utilitarian. The youth are instructed, faithfully and carefully instructed, in what are termed the *useful* branches of education. They are systematically drilled into the simple and primary branches; are taught to read and write; acquire some familiarity with the fundamental laws of grammar and arithmetic; and are then sent into the world. Better men and better citizens they undoubtedly are; better prepared for the counting-house and the workshop, so far as this preparation at the school is concerned. But the great object of all education remains unaccomplished, unless, at the same time, the mind has been enlarged, the thinking faculty refined and cultivated. Men must be taught to think, or education has failed in the best part of its duty. Men are made better citizens, through means of an education, only in so far as they are prepared by it the better to play their allotted part in life, and add something not merely to their private happiness, but, if possible, to the public greatness and glory. Such is the education we would have for our country. And this education must cease to be sectional, and extend itself throughout the length and breadth of the land, equally to all. The education of its people is the solemn duty of a nation, and must be performed. For its omission there can be no excuse; the darkness of ignorance and the certainty of national ruin are the alternatives. Let the education of a community be such that its members shall be elevated and refined—an education of the thought and sentiment; and one of the strongest materials that can be used in the great work of building up a national literature is already obtained.

Thus, gentlemen, have I briefly and hurriedly adverted to the literary wants of America, to the reasons of her slow progress, to her peculiar advantages, and the means to be used by her in the establishment of a national literature. It is a theme upon which volumes might be written, and any attempt to consider which, within the limits I have allotted myself, must fall far short of doing justice.

A great work is to be performed by America. She has yet to establish for herself a national literature, yet to win for herself a place among the refined and cultivated nations of the Globe. Her first step is the creation of a lofty standard of excellence both of thought and expression. This gained, the rest is more easily accomplished. It is the work of criticism to point out this standard. Let criticism do its duty faithfully and earnestly. Let it busy itself with the essence, the soul, and not the garment of its subject. Mindful of the importance of its decisions, those decisions should be based upon the sure foundations of reason and truth. "Criticism," says an eloquent writer, "stands like an interpreter between the inspired and the uninspired; between the prophet and those who hear the melody of his words,

and catch some glimpses of their material meaning, but understand not their deeper import. She pretends to open for us this deeper import, to clear our sense, that we may discern the pure brightness of this eternal beauty, and recognise the heavenly, under all forms where it looks forth; and reject of the earth, earthy, all forms, be their natural splendor what it may, where no gleamings of that other shines through." Let her see to it, that this great duty is performed; that the beautiful is exhibited to admiration, and the base to deprecation, wherever discernible. This standard obtained, let society work with it ever in view. The masses must be educated with a view to the study and appreciation of it. The language, common to England and America, must be taught in our schools, not as if it were a mere mechanical contrivance, invented for the convenience of men in their daily transactions of business or pleasure—a matter of mere grammatical construction—but as the great medium of thought, a knowledge of which will ensure the best means of obtaining an insight into the thoughts of great and good men, of knowing and understanding the virtue and excellence of former times, and establishing that of the present.

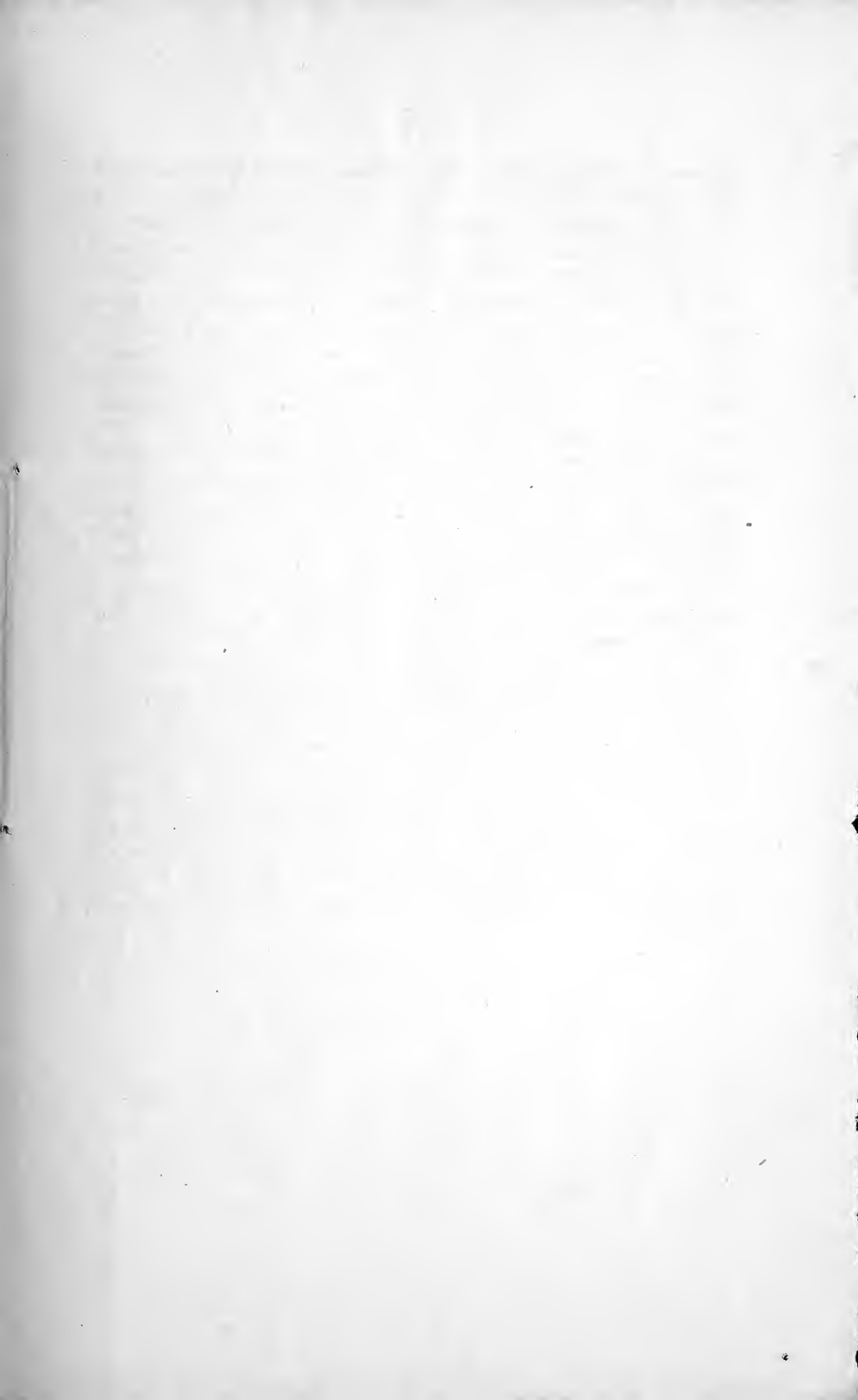
The author, as well as the community, has a part to perform in this great work. He is the thinker for society. Future ages will read his writings, and judge the age in which he writes by them. Let him so write, that his productions may be worthy the approval of the good; that their influence shall be beneficial to his country. Above all, let him free himself from the burden of gross imitation which has so disfigured our literary productions in these latter times. It would seem that oddity and mysticism were the literary orders of the day. A kind of jargon is affected by those who would be popular, as if to be incomprehensible were the surest road to the respect of the community. This kind of writing must and will be condemned by a sensible and sense-loving people. The beautiful simplicity of pure English must be preserved, unadulterated by any mixture of odd and incomprehensible jargons, undisfigured by any attempts to graft upon it the mysticism of the transcendentalist.

In the brief period of her existence as a nation, America has accomplished wonders; and were some terrible convulsion now to tear her from her proud position among nations, were the sun of her greatness now to go down, it would leave behind it, upon the clouds of time, an imperishable halo. Her history would be read by coming generations with wonder and admiration. She would be remembered as the land of free and noble institutions, as the land of Washington and Hancock, of Jefferson and Adams, of Fulton and Morse. Her great men, statesmen, generals, and inventors, have built up for her a name destined to stand the test of ages. But there are other men whose efforts have added a new lustre to her

greatness. The works of Franklin, of Channing, of Irving, of Bryant and Longfellow, of Bancroft and Prescott, will call forth the admiration of all coming generations. The ready adoption by the nation of the grand system of international exchanges, and the energetic earnestness manifested in the task of fulfilling the bequest of the generous Smithson, are indications of the character of the people, which no time can obliterate. These show that America has made a beginning in the cause of literature. Let this beginning be followed out. Let the citizens of America learn how to appreciate these literary men as they ought; let them see to it that the historian of our times does not have to record the utter want of sympathy, on the part of society, with their refining and elevating labors.

Great and lofty minds must and will be the productions of the free institutions of America; men of bold and fearless thought! Such men are what we need. Let no blind admiration for old and long established models cause these men to be unappreciated. Genius is a tender plant, and must be carefully and tenderly nurtured. The grandeur of Milton, the universal excellence of Shakspeare, the purity of Addison, are not to be equalled by a nation but a little more than half a century old. But should this deter the youthful nation from action? Shall every writer who attempts a new train of thought be judged a presumptuous innovator, and himself and his works be doomed to oblivion? No; let America respect herself too much to be content with mere imitation. Let her aim to build up for herself a literary class of her own—her own authors, poets, philosophers, and historians. Let her build up for herself a literature which shall be the expression of high, lofty, noble, and original thought; then shall she truly take her position with other cultivated nations; and if in after ages the historian shall rank her side by side with Greece and Rome, as a republic whose glory has departed; let him have the duty, too, of recording her name among those of the refined and elegant nations of the globe.









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